

# THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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AT CHAPEL HILL

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The New Testament*

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# A Brief Introduction to

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

FOURTH EDITION

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# The Historical Jesus

## WHAT TO EXPECT

It is one thing to study the Gospels as pieces of literature, to see what their authors thought about the meaning and importance of Jesus; that has been our approach to the Gospels so far. It is another thing to ask what the Gospels can tell us about the man Jesus himself—what he actually said, did, and experienced. That is the question we will be addressing in this chapter.

We start by considering other sources for Jesus' life and death outside the New Testament. We then move to consider our best historical sources, the New Testament Gospels. Even these pose problems for historians: they were written decades after the facts, by people who were not eyewitnesses, in a different language from Jesus', based on stories that had been circulating by word of mouth for decades and that had been changed and occasionally made up.

Still, by using methods devised by historians, we can study the Gospels to see what Jesus was really like, what he really said and did. In the second part of the chapter, we will show that Jesus is best understood as a Jewish apocalypticist, who preached the need to repent in view of the coming judgment and the Kingdom of God, which was expected to arrive very soon.

Up to this point in our study we have examined the early Christian Gospels as discrete pieces of literature, uncovering their unique portrayals of Jesus through a variety of methods: genre-critical, redactional, and comparative. At every stage, we have been interested in learning how an author, and the sources he used, understood and portrayed the life of Jesus. But at no point have we moved beyond these literary concerns to ask about what actually happened during the life of Jesus, to find out what he really said, did, and experienced. We are now in a position to explore these

other, purely historical issues. Apart from what certain Christian authors said about Jesus long after the fact, what can we know about the man himself, about the actual life of the historical Jesus (see box 9.1)?



## PROBLEMS WITH SOURCES

The only way that we can know what a person from the past said and did is by examining sources from the period that provide us with information.



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.1 Did Jesus Exist?

Scholars are widely convinced that some of the stories about Jesus in the New Testament are not historically accurate but have been changed or even “made up” by his followers in the years after his death. But is it possible that Jesus himself was made up? That he never existed? That he was “invented” by later Jews who wanted to create a savior figure who never actually lived?

That is the view set forth in a number of recent books—most of them not written by scholars but by sensationalists wanting to cause a stir—and on a number of websites. The authors of these claims point out that Jesus is not mentioned in any non-Christian sources of the first century except Josephus; moreover, they claim that even the comments about Jesus in Josephus were not original but were inserted into his writings by later Christians. Furthermore, because Jesus is so much like other “divine men” (see pp. 15–18 for example), he may well have been fabricated by fervent Jewish religious persons who wanted someone to worship like the pagan sons of God.

There are insurmountable problems with this view, however, as scholars have long known (see the book *Did Jesus Exist?* by Ehrman in “Suggestions

For Further Reading”). For one thing, even though there are no references to the historical Jesus in early Roman sources, the references to him in Christian sources are all over the place, in surviving authors and in sources behind the Gospels: Paul, Mark, Q, M, L, John’s Signs Source and Discourse Sources, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas—all of them independent of one another. No one person or group could have made up Jesus. He was talked about all over the map. Moreover, the traditions can easily be traced back to a year or so after the traditional date of Jesus’ death: some of them contain Aramaic words, which reveal that they date from the earliest years of Palestinian Aramaic-speaking Christianity. It is especially striking, as well, that one of our authors, Paul, indicates that he personally knew Jesus’ own brother James and his closest disciple Peter (Gal. 1:18–2:10). If Jesus never existed, you would think that his brother and best friend would know about it!

For these reasons—and many others—scholars have virtually no doubts whatsoever: whatever one wants to say about Jesus, it is clear at least that he existed.

Most of our sources for the past are literary, that is, they are texts written by authors who refer to the person’s words and deeds. But sources of this kind are not always reliable. Even eyewitness accounts are often contradictory, and contemporary observers not infrequently get the facts wrong. Moreover, most historical sources, for the distant past at least, do not derive from eyewitnesses but from later authors reporting the rumors and traditions they have heard.

For these reasons, historians have to devise criteria for determining which sources can be trusted and which ones cannot. Most historians would agree that for reconstructing a past event, the ideal situation would be to have sources that (a) are numerous, so they can be compared to one another; (b) derive from a time near the event itself, so that

they are less likely to have been based on hearsay or legend; (c) were produced independently of one another, so that their authors were not in collusion; (d) do not contradict one another, so that one or more of them is not necessarily in error; (e) are internally consistent, suggesting a basic concern for reliability; and (f) are not biased toward the subject matter, so that their authors have not skewed their accounts to serve their own purposes.

Are the New Testament Gospels—our principal sources for reconstructing the life of Jesus—these kinds of sources (see box 9.2)? Before pursuing the question, let me emphasize that I am not passing judgment on the worth of these books, trying to undermine their authority for those who believe in them, or asking whether they are important as religious or theological documents. I am instead



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.2 The Apostles as Guarantors of the Truth?

Some people have maintained that the Gospels must be historically accurate because the apostles of Jesus would surely have not allowed false information to circulate concerning Jesus while they were still alive and active in the Christian communities and able to verify the accounts that were being told of him.

On the surface this view seems plausible. But it is also important to think how stories of Jesus were orally transmitted and then written down over the decades. When the Gospels were written, some thirty-five to sixty-five years after Jesus' death, most of the disciples would have already died. The Gospels were written in other lands, by people who did not know the disciples. Moreover, even before that, the twelve apostles could not be everywhere at once. The stories, however, were circulating in cities, towns, and villages all over the Mediterranean. As a result, it would have been impossible for the apostles to serve as "watchdogs" to make sure traditions were never invented or changed.

There is only one way to know whether stories about Jesus were ever made up or modified. That's by looking at all the stories, comparing them with one another, and deciding for yourself. In fact, no one really thinks that stories were never made up: consider the story of Jesus emerging from his tomb tall as a skyscraper, with the cross walking behind him, in one of our earliest Gospels, the *Gospel of Peter*. Or consider the stories of Jesus as a mischievous young boy in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Someone was making up stories! And that stories were often changed is equally easy to prove. Simply compare the same story told by any two Gospel writers of the New Testament in detail, and in almost every instance you will find differences, great and small.

The apostles no doubt did tell the stories of Jesus' life as they remembered them. But these came to be modified and embellished over time, and other stories came to be made up. The task of the historian is to determine which of the surviving stories are historically accurate and which are not.

asking the question of the historian: are these books reliable for reconstructing what Jesus actually said and did?

As a first step toward an answer, we can ask whether any of the Gospel accounts can be corroborated by other ancient sources that describe the life and teachings of the historical Jesus.

As it turns out—this may surprise you—we do not have sources outside the New Testament that can assist us much in knowing what Jesus really said, did, and experienced. We have no birth records for Jesus, or accounts of his trial and death, or references at all to his words and deeds among any of the many writings that survive from his own day. Oddly enough his name is never even *mentioned* by any Roman pagan until about the year 115 C.E.—that is, some eighty-five years after his death. Even then we are given only brief references in a writer such as in the Roman historian Tacitus, who does at least indicate that Jesus was executed

by Pontius Pilate. Not even Jewish sources of the first century mention him, with one exception: the Jewish historian Josephus, who gives a basic sketch of Jesus' life in his twenty-volume work called the *Antiquities of the Jews* (see box 3.2). As you will see in box 9.3, this brief statement is enough to let us know that Josephus at least knew about Jesus, but it does not really help us to decide what Jesus was really like.

Of course, as we have seen on several occasions, there were other Christian Gospels written about Jesus, which theoretically may shed some light on his life (see boxes 4.2, 5.5, 6.4, 6.5, and 8.3). But virtually all these Gospels were written long after Jesus died and are filled with legendary materials.

One might think that the letters of Paul or the other writings of the New Testament would provide us with valuable information about Jesus' life. Unfortunately, there are not many references to Jesus' words and deeds in Paul or any of these other



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.3 The Testimony of Flavius Josephus

Probably the most controversial passage in all of Josephus's writings is his description of Jesus in book 18 of *The Antiquities of the Jews*.

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out. (*Antiquities* 18, 3.3)

This testimony to Jesus has long puzzled scholars. Why would Josephus, a devout Jew who never became a Christian, profess faith in Jesus by suggesting that he was something more than a man, calling him the messiah (rather than merely saying that others *thought* he was), and claiming that he was raised from the dead in fulfillment of prophecy?

Many scholars have recognized that the problem can be solved by looking at how, and by whom, Josephus's writings were transmitted over the centuries. For in fact they were not preserved by Jews, many of whom considered him to be a traitor because of his conduct during and after the war with Rome (see box 3.2). Rather, it was Christians who copied Josephus's writings through the ages. Is it possible that this reference to Jesus has been beefed up a bit by a Christian scribe who wanted to make Josephus appear more appreciative of the "true faith"?

If we take out the Christianized portions of the passage, what we are left with, according to one of the most convincing modern studies, is the following:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out. (Meier 1991, 61)

authors (who were more interested in his death and resurrection than his life).

For all these reasons, we are more or less restricted to our four earliest surviving accounts of Jesus' life—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—if we want to discover what he actually said, did, and experienced. It's a great advantage, of course, to have four different sources of Jesus' life—that's far more than we have for most people from antiquity! The problem is that these books were not written to provide objective biographical information about Jesus. They were *Gospels*, that is, proclamations of the good news that Jesus brings salvation to the world. The books were written decades after the events they narrate, by people who were not eyewitnesses, who are telling the tales in a different language from Jesus', based on oral traditions that

the authors themselves had heard and that had circulated by word of mouth decade after decade before being written down. These traditions were modified when they were told and retold and modified further when written down (see chap. 4). How can these Gospels be used—not to tell us what the authors *thought* about Jesus (the task we pursued in the preceding chapters) but to find out what actually happened in his life?



### USING OUR SOURCES

#### Some Rules of Thumb

There are in fact some basic methodological principles that can be used to determine what

probably happened during the life of Jesus, using our surviving sources. These principles include the following:

1. The earlier the better. Sources closest in time to Jesus' life obviously are nearer to the facts than those written much later. This is not to say that late sources (e.g., the Gospels of John and Thomas) cannot contain historically reliable information. But generally speaking, earlier sources have had less time to be modified and embellished. And so, early sources such as Mark and Q (as it is reconstructed) are most valuable.
2. The more the better. If there is a tradition about Jesus found in two or more sources independently of one another, then it is more likely to go back to Jesus than a tradition found in only one source. The criterion works only when the sources are *not* dependent on each other: for example, when Mark and John and Paul, none of whom knew the others' work, independently indicate that Jesus preached mainly to Jews, or that he had brothers, or that he was crucified—then chances are improved that these traditions are historical. (Note that a story found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is *not* multiply attested because Matthew and Luke would have gotten it from Mark.)
3. The more it works against a bias the better. All sources, of course, are biased. But if there is a tradition found in a source that seems to work *against* the Christian perspective of the source itself, then you can be pretty sure that the author of that source did not *make up* the story. If he had, he would have made it coincide with his own bias. And so, when the Gospels speak of Jesus being baptized—would Christians (who thought that the spiritually superior person always baptized the spiritually inferior one) have made it up? It seems unlikely. Or when they say that Jesus came from Nazareth (a little one-horse hamlet that no one had heard of), why would they have invented *that*? Sometimes this rule is described as “**the criterion of dissimilarity**”: if a tradition of Jesus is dissimilar to what Christians telling the stories would have wanted to say about him (e.g., that he was baptized, or that he came from Nazareth, or

that one of his closest followers betrayed him), then it is probably authentic.

4. The more contextually credible the better. If there are traditions about Jesus that cannot fit into a first-century Palestinian Jewish context, they are probably not authentic. If, for example, there is a clever saying of Jesus that works as a pun in Greek (the language of the Gospels) but not in Aramaic (the language he really spoke), then it is probably not something he actually said.

When these rules are applied carefully to the traditions of Jesus, it becomes clear that he was a Jew like many other Jews of his day, who worshiped the God of the Jews and followed his Law. But as we have already seen, there were lots of different kinds of Jews in the first century (you may want to review chap. 3 at this point). What kind was Jesus?

To make sense of our earliest and best preserved traditions about Jesus, it is important to make a brief detour to consider a form of Judaism that was prevalent in Jesus' day, a form of Judaism that scholars have labeled “apocalyptic,” from the word “unveiling” or “revealing.” Many Jews of Jesus' day believed that God had revealed the truth that he was soon to overthrow the mysterious forces of evil (e.g., the Devil and his demons) in a mighty show of power. What more fully was this worldview of apocalypticism, and how can it help explain what Jesus said and did?



### JEWISH APOCALYPTICISM

We know about Jewish apocalypticism from a number of sources, including the Dead Sea Scrolls (written from around the time of Jesus) and other writings from the time. Apocalypticists were concerned with the question of why the people of God were suffering (e.g., through foreign oppression), and they called into question the view that had held sway for many centuries: that people suffered because they had done something wrong and God was punishing them. If that older explanation were correct, why is it that when people repent and return to God they *still* suffer? Moreover, how can one explain that the righteous suffer—often even

more than the wicked—sometimes for doing what is *right*?

Jewish apocalypticists maintained that God's people were suffering not because God was punishing them for evil but because there were evil forces in the world who were opposed to God and his people and were bent on harming and destroying all those who sided with God. But, according to this view, God was still sovereign over the world, and he would soon vindicate his name and his people by bringing an end to the suffering and the evil forces who were causing it. He would then bring in his new Kingdom on earth, in which good, peace, and justice would prevail forever.

More specifically, Jewish apocalypticists as a whole subscribed to four major tenets: dualism, pessimism, vindication, and imminence.

### Dualism

Jewish apocalypticists were dualists. They maintained that there were two fundamental components to all of reality: the forces of good and the forces of evil. The forces of good were headed by God himself, and the forces of evil by his superhuman enemy, sometimes called Satan, Beelzebub, or the Devil. On the side of God were the good angels; on the side of the Devil were the demons. On the side of God were righteousness and life; on the side of the Devil were sin and death. These forces were cosmic powers to which human beings were subject and with which they had to be aligned. No one was in neutral territory. People stood either with God or with Satan, in the light or in darkness, in the truth or in error.

This apocalyptic dualism had clear historical implications in that all of history could be divided into two ages: the present age and the age to come. The present age was the age of sin and evil. The powers of darkness were in the ascendancy, and those who sided with God were made to suffer by those in control of this world. Sin, disease, famine, violence, and death were rampant. For some unknown reason, God had relinquished control of this age to the powers of evil—and things were getting worse.

At the end of this age, however, God would reassert himself, intervening in history and destroying

the forces of evil. After a cataclysmic break in which all that was opposed to God would be annihilated, God would bring in a new age. In this new age, there would be no more suffering or pain; there would be no more hatred, despair, war, disease, or death. God would be the ruler of all, in a kingdom that would never end.

### Pessimism

Even though, in the long run, everything would work out for those who sided with God, in the short term, things did not look good. Jewish apocalypticists maintained that those who sided with God were going to suffer in this age, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. The forces of evil were going to grow in power as they attempted to wrest sovereignty over this world away from God. There was no thought of being able to improve the human condition through mass education or advanced technology. The righteous could not make their lives better because the forces of evil were in control, and those who sided with God were opposed by those who were much stronger than they. Things would get worse and worse until the very end, when, quite literally, all hell would break loose.

### Vindication

At the end, when the suffering of God's people was at its height, God would finally intervene on their behalf and vindicate his name. In the apocalyptic perspective, God was not only the creator of this world but also its redeemer. His vindication would be universal; it would affect the entire world, not simply the Jewish nation. Jewish apocalypticists maintained that the entire creation had become corrupt because of the presence of sin and the power of Satan. This universal corruption required a universal redemption; God would destroy all that is evil and create a new heaven and a new earth, one in which the forces of evil would have no place.

Different apocalypticists had different views concerning how God would bring about this new creation, even though they all claimed to have received the details in a revelation from God. In

some apocalyptic scenarios, God was to send a human messiah to lead the troops of the children of light into battle against the forces of evil. In others, God was to send a kind of cosmic judge of the earth, sometimes also called the messiah or the Son of Man, to bring about a cataclysmic overthrow of the demonic powers that oppressed the children of light.

This final vindication would involve a day of judgment for all people. Those who had aligned themselves with the powers of evil would face the Almighty Judge and render an account of what they had done; those who had remained faithful to the true God would be rewarded and brought into his eternal kingdom. Moreover, this judgment applied not only to people who happened to be living at the time of the end. One could not side with the powers of evil, oppress the people of God, die prosperous and contented, and get away with it. God would allow no one to escape. He was going to raise all people bodily from the dead to receive their reward or punishment: eternal bliss for those who had taken his side, eternal torment for everyone else.

### Imminence

According to Jewish apocalypticists, this vindication of God was going to happen very soon. Standing in the tradition of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, apocalypticists maintained that God had revealed to them the course of history and that the end was almost here. Those who were evil had to repent before it was too late. Those who were good, who were suffering as a result, were to hold on, for it would not be long before God would intervene by sending a savior, possibly on the clouds of heaven, to pass judgment on the people of the earth and bring the good kingdom to those who had remained faithful to his Law. Indeed, the end was right around the corner. In the words of one first-century Jewish apocalypticist: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” These, in fact, are the words of Jesus (Mark 9:1). Or as he says elsewhere, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things have taken place” (Mark 13:30).



### JESUS IN HIS APOCALYPTIC CONTEXT

Some of the earliest traditions about Jesus portray him as a Jewish apocalypticist who responded to the political and social crises of his day, including the domination of his nation by a foreign power, by proclaiming that his generation was living at the end of the age, and that God would soon intervene on behalf of his people. He would send a cosmic judge, the Son of Man, who would destroy the forces of evil and set up God’s kingdom. In preparation for his coming, the people of Israel needed to repent and turn to God, trusting him as a kindly parent and loving one another as his special children. Those who refused to accept this message would be liable to the punishment of God.

Is this ancient portrayal of Jesus, which is embodied in a number of our oldest traditions, historically accurate? Was Jesus a Jewish apocalypticist (see box 9.4)?

This is one of the most hotly debated questions among New Testament researchers today. Even so, the majority of critical scholars who have studied the question carefully over the past hundred years have been convinced that this is precisely what Jesus was. The reasons have to do with our surviving sources. The earliest traditions about Jesus portray Jesus consistently as proclaiming an apocalyptic message. This is the case of Q (e.g., Luke 17:24, 26 and 27, 30; cf. Matt 24:27; 37–39); Mark (8:38–9:1; 13:24–27, 30), M (Matt 13:40–43), and L (Luke 21:34–36). These sources are all independent of one another. Moreover, some of these traditions pass the “criterion of dissimilarity.” And all of them are contextually credible, given the circumstance that we know of other Jews making a similar proclamation in Jesus’ day.

Apart from these particular passages that are found in our earliest sources, one especially compelling reason for thinking that Jesus must have been an apocalypticist is an argument that I sometimes call “the beginning and end as keys to the middle.” The argument is a bit involved, but it focuses on what we know with relative certainty about both the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and its aftermath, and it makes best sense that Jesus himself is



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.4 Explaining Away the Apocalyptic Traditions: Seeking the Lost

Because one cannot very well deny that our earliest surviving sources portray Jesus as an apocalypticist, one interesting approach taken by scholars who do not see him this way is to claim that he was portrayed differently in the earliest *non*-surviving sources. One of the most popular proposals along this line involves the Q source, which, as I have pointed out, we no longer have (see p. 61). This has not stopped scholars from telling us all sorts of things about it—not only what its precise contents were (and, more important, what they were not) but also what the communities that produced it were like and what had happened in their social lives together. This is not bad for a nonexistent source!

This is an important issue precisely because of the undeniable fact that if Q was the source for the materials in common between Matthew and Luke that are not found in Mark, then it was loaded with apocalyptic traditions. If one does not want to portray Jesus as an apocalypticist, how can one get around this problem? One could argue that Q in fact came out in multiple editions.

According to this line, the *original* edition of Q did not have the apocalyptic traditions about Jesus. These were only added later, when the document was edited by Christians who were a bit obsessed with the imminent end of the age. Thus, according to this theory, Q as we have it (well, even though

we don't have it) may be an apocalyptic document. But in fact it provides evidence of a nonapocalyptic Jesus.

This proposal is principally held by scholars who maintain that Jesus was a witty and compelling teacher but not an apocalyptic preacher of the coming end of the age. And it is easy to see the drawing power of the theory: in the earliest edition of this nonexistent source, Jesus is said to have delivered a lot of terrific one-liners but uttered not a word about a coming Son of Man, sent from heaven in judgment.

Still, the proposal is enormously problematic. To reconstruct what we think was in Q is hypothetical enough. But at least in doing so we have some hard evidence because we do have traditions that are repeated verbatim in Matthew and Luke (but not found in Mark), and we have to account for them in *some* way. But to go further and insist that we know what was *not* in the source—for example, all its apocalyptic sayings—really goes far beyond what we can know, however appealing such “knowledge” might be. And remember: these sayings are found in the only two documents that provide us our only solid evidence for the contents of Q!

What evidence, however, exists to *disprove* this particular theory of Q? Well, strictly speaking, none does. The document does not exist!

the connecting link between that beginning and that end.



### THE BEGINNING AND END AS KEYS TO THE MIDDLE

There is little doubt about how Jesus began his ministry: he was baptized by John. The story is independently attested by multiple sources; Mark, Q, and John all begin with Jesus’ associating with

the Baptist. Also, it is not a story the early Christians would have been inclined to invent because it was commonly understood that the one doing the baptizing was spiritually superior to the one being baptized (i.e., the story passes the criterion of dissimilarity). Moreover, the event is contextually credible. John appears to have been one of the “prophets” who arose during the first century of the Common Era in Palestine. Somewhat like first-century Jewish prophets called Theudas and the Egyptian (see box 9.9), he predicted that God was



about to destroy his enemies and reward his people, as he had done in the days of old. And like them, he was destroyed by the ruling officials.

John the Baptist appears to have preached a message of coming destruction and salvation. Mark portrays him as a prophet in the wilderness (see fig. 9.1) who proclaims the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that God would again bring his people from the wilderness into the Promised Land (Mark 1:2–8). When this happened the first time, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, it meant destruction for the nations already inhabiting the land. In preparation for this imminent event, John baptized those who repented of their sins, that is, those who were ready to enter into this coming kingdom. The Q source gives further information, for here John preaches a clear message of apocalyptic judgment to the crowds that have come out to see him: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. . . . Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7–9). Judgment is imminent (the ax is at the root

of the tree) and it will not be a pretty sight. In preparation, Jews can no longer rely on having a covenantal relationship with God: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8). Instead, they must repent and turn to God anew by doing the things he requires of them.

Jesus went out into the wilderness to be baptized by this prophet. But why did he go? Because nobody compelled him, he must have gone to John, instead of to someone else, because he agreed with John’s message. Jesus did not join the Pharisees, who emphasized the scrupulous observance of the Torah, or align himself with the Sadducees, who focused on the worship of God through the Temple cult. He did not associate with the Essenes, who formed monastic communities to maintain their own ritual purity, or subscribe to the teachings of the “fourth philosophy,” which advocated a violent rejection of Roman domination. He associated with an apocalyptic prophet in the wilderness who anticipated the imminent end of the age.

That was how Jesus began. Is it possible, however, that he changed his views during the course of his ministry and began to focus on something other than what John preached? This is certainly possible, but it would not explain why so many apocalyptic sayings are found on Jesus’ own lips in the earliest sources for his life (but see box 9.5). Even more seriously, it would not explain what clearly emerged in the aftermath of his ministry. I have argued that we are relatively certain about how Jesus’ ministry began; we are even more certain about what happened in its wake. After Jesus’ death, those who believed in him established communities of followers throughout the Mediterranean. We have a good idea of what these Christians believed because some of them have left us writings. These earliest writings are imbued with apocalyptic thinking. The earliest Christians were Jews who believed that they were living at the end of the age and that Jesus himself was to return from heaven as a cosmic judge of the earth to punish those who opposed God and to reward the faithful (e.g., see 1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:51–57, writings from the earliest Christian author, Paul). The church that emerged in Jesus’ wake was apocalyptic.



**Figure 9.1** Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This is one of the earliest paintings of Jesus to survive from antiquity (from about two centuries after Jesus’ death) from the catacomb of San Callisto in Rome.



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.5 Explaining Away the Apocalyptic Traditions: Getting a Date

One of the most prominent scholars engaged in the study of the historical Jesus is a witty and indomitable historian named John Dominic Crossan, whose books on Jesus have become best sellers. Crossan does not think Jesus was an apocalypticist. What does he do with the fact that our earliest sources, Q, Mark, M, and L, portray Jesus as an apocalypticist? He denies that these are our earliest sources.

Crossan engages in a detailed analysis to argue that other sources not found in the New Testament are earlier than the sources that are. These others include such documents as the “Egerton Gospel,” a fragmentary text from the second century that contains four stories about Jesus; the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which, as we have seen, no longer survives, but is quoted a bit by some church fathers in the late second to the early fifth centuries; and parts of the *Gospel of Peter*, which survives again only in fragments. Such sources, Crossan claims, provide more reliable access to Jesus than the New Testament Gospels,

which everyone, including Crossan, dates to the first century.

Again, one can see the appeal of such an argument for someone who denies that Jesus was an apocalypticist. For if in fact the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, to pick one example, is older than the *Gospel of Mark*, even though it's never mentioned or even alluded to until 190 C.E. or so (and is seen by nearly everyone else, therefore, as a second-century production), then Mark's apocalyptic Jesus could well be a later creation formed from the nonapocalyptic Jesus of the *Gospel of the Hebrews*!

But this strikes most scholars as a case of special pleading. Most recognize clear and certain reasons for dating the New Testament Gospels to the first century. But giving yet earlier dates to noncanonical Gospels that are, in most cases, not quoted or even mentioned by early Christian writers until many, many decades later seems to be overly speculative and driven by an ultimate objective of claiming that Jesus was not an apocalypticist even though our earliest sources indicate that he was.

Thus, Jesus' ministry began with his association with John the Baptist, an apocalyptic prophet, and ended with the establishment of the Christian church, a community of apocalyptic Jews who believed in him. The fact that Jesus' ministry began apocalyptically and ended apocalyptically gives us the key to interpreting what happened in between. The only connection between the apocalyptic John and the apocalyptic Christian church was Jesus himself. How could both the beginning and the end be apocalyptic if the middle was not as well? It seems that the majority of critical scholars are right that Jesus was a Jewish apocalypticist.

To call Jesus an apocalypticist does not mean that Jesus was saying and doing exactly what every other Jewish apocalypticist was saying and doing. We are still interested in learning specifically what Jesus taught and did during his life. Knowing that his overall message was apocalyptic, however, can

help us understand other aspects of the tradition about him that can be established as authentic. For our purposes here, I can give only a brief sketch of his deeds and teachings.



### THE APOCALYPTIC DEEDS OF JESUS

#### The Crucifixion

The most certain element of the tradition about Jesus is that he was crucified on the orders of the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate. The crucifixion is independently attested by a wide array of sources and is not the sort of thing that believers would want to make up about the person proclaimed to be the powerful Son of God (see box 5.2). Why, historically, was Jesus crucified? This is the



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.6 Was Jesus a Cynic Philosopher?

Some recent American scholars have proposed that Jesus should be understood not as a Jewish apocalyptic but as a kind of Jewish **Cynic philosopher**. The term “cynic” in this context does not carry the same connotations that it does for us when we say that someone is “cynical.” When referring to the Greco-Roman world, it denotes a particular philosophical position that was advocated by a number of well-known public characters.

The term “cynic” actually means “dog.” It was a designation given to a certain group of philosophers by their opponents, who claimed that they lived like wild mongrels. In some respects, the designation was apt, for Cynics urged people to abandon the trappings of society and live “according to nature.” For them, the most important things in life were those over which people could have some control, such as their attitudes toward others, their likes and dislikes, and their opinions. Other things outside of their control were of no importance. Followers of the cynics were therefore admonished not to burden themselves with material possessions, such as nice houses or fine clothes, or to worry about how to earn money or what to eat. To this extent, the Cynics were closely aligned in their views to the Stoic philosophers. They differed, however, in the degree of their social respectability. Cynics rejected most constraints imposed by society, even society’s ethical mores, so as to live “naturally.” The Cynics who practiced what they preached had virtually no possessions, often lived on the streets, rarely bathed, begged for a living, performed private bodily functions in public places, and spent their days haranguing people to adopt their philosophical views. They were especially renowned for abusing people on street corners and in marketplaces, where they

castigated those who thought that the meaning of life could be found in wealth or in any of the other trappings of society.

Was Jesus like that? Scholars who think so point out that many of his teachings sound remarkably similar to what we hear from the Cynics. Jesus’ followers were to abandon all their possessions (Matt 6:19–21; Mark 11:21 and 22); they were not to be concerned about what to wear or what to eat (Matt 6:25–33); they were to live with the bare essentials and accept whatever was given to them by others (Mark 6:6–13; Luke 10:1–12); they were to condemn those who rejected their message (Luke 10:1–12); and they were to expect to be misunderstood and mistreated (Matt 5:11 and 12). So may be Jesus was, then, a Jewish Cynic.

Other scholars believe that this is taking matters too far. All of our ancient sources portray Jesus as quoting the Hebrew Scriptures to support his perspective, but never does he quote any of the Greek or Roman philosophers or urge his followers to adhere to their teachings. Moreover, the message of his teaching is not, ultimately, about living in accordance with nature. It is about the God of Israel, the true interpretation of his law, and the coming judgment against those who are unrepentant. Thus, although it is true that Jesus’ followers were told not to concern themselves with wealth and the trappings of society, these teachings were not rooted in a concern for promoting self-sufficiency in a harsh and capricious world. Rather, his followers were not to be tied to the concerns of this age because it was passing away and a new age was soon to come. Jesus may have appeared to an outsider to be similar in some ways to an itinerant Cynic philosopher, but his message was in fact quite different.

question that every reconstruction of the life of Jesus has to answer, and some of the answers proffered over the years have not been very plausible. If, for example, Jesus had simply been a great moral teacher, a gentle rabbi who did nothing more than urge his devoted followers to love God and one

another, or an itinerant philosopher who urged them to abandon their possessions and live a simple life, depending on no one but God (see box 9.6), then he would scarcely have been seen as a threat to the Romans and nailed to a cross. Great moral teachers were not crucified—unless their teachings

were considered subversive. Nor were charismatic leaders with followings crucified—unless their followers were thought to be dangerous.

The subversive teachers from Jesus' day were labeled as prophets, people who proclaimed the imminent downfall of the social order and the advent of a new kingdom to replace the corrupt ruling powers. According to the traditions recorded in the New Testament and Josephus, John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed because of his preaching; according to the Gospels, he directed his words against Herod Antipas, appointed to rule over the Promised Land. Jesus was to fare no better. Those who prophesied the triumph of God were liable to the judgment of Rome.

In the case of Jesus, however, it is not altogether clear that Rome initiated the proceedings. It appears that Jesus' message was directed not only against the Roman powers but also against the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem that supported them, as seen in another tradition that can be established beyond reasonable doubt as authentic.

### The Temple Incident

We know with relative certainty that Jesus predicted that the Temple (see fig. 9.2) was soon to be destroyed by God. Predictions of this sort are contextually credible, given what we have learned about other prophets in the days of Jesus. Jesus' own predictions are independently attested by a wide range of sources (cf. Mark 13:1; 14:58; John 2:19; Acts 6:14). Moreover, it is virtually certain that some days before his death, Jesus entered the Temple, overturned some of the tables that were set up inside, and generally caused a disturbance.

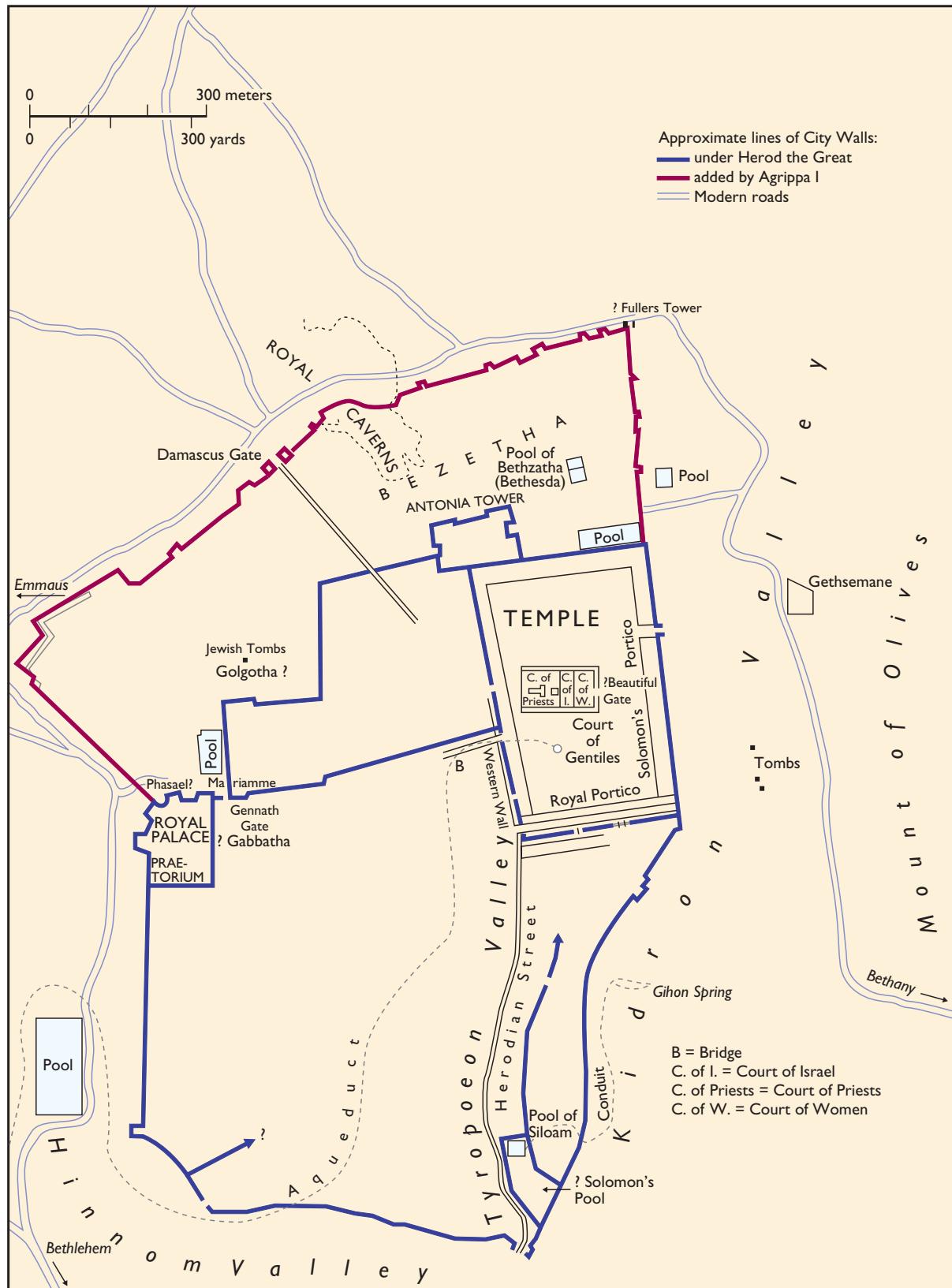
The account is multiply attested (Mark 11 and John 2), and it is consistent with the predictions scattered throughout the tradition about the coming destruction of the Temple. Therefore, it is unlikely that Christians invented the story to show their own opposition to the Temple, as some scholars have claimed. It is possible, however, that Christians modified the tradition in some ways, as they modified most of the stories that they retold over the years. In the earliest surviving account, Jesus displays a superhuman show of strength, shutting down the entire Temple group by an act of his will (Mark 11:16). But the Temple complex was

immense, and there would have been armed guards present to prevent any major disturbances. Mark's account, then, may represent an exaggeration of the effect of Jesus' actions.

It is hard to know whether Jesus' words during this episode should be accepted as authentic. He quotes the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah to indicate that the Temple group has become corrupt, calling it "a den of thieves." Indeed, it is possible that Jesus, like the Essenes, believed that the worship of God in the Temple had gotten out of hand and that the Sadducees in control had abused their power and privileges to their own end. But it is also possible that Jesus' actions are to be taken as a kind of enacted parable, comparable to the symbolic actions performed by a number of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures (see box 9.7). By overturning the tables and causing a disturbance, Jesus could have been projecting what was to happen when his words against the Temple came to fruition, foreshadowing the destruction of the Temple that he anticipated was soon to come.

But how did Jesus' prediction that the Temple would be destroyed fit into his broader apocalyptic message? Two possible answers suggest themselves. It may be that he believed that in the new age there would be a new Temple, totally sanctified for the worship of God. This was the view of the apocalyptically minded Essenes. Or it may be that Jesus believed there would be no need for a temple at all in the kingdom that was coming because there would no longer be any evil or sin, and therefore no need for the group sacrifice of animals to bring atonement. In either case, the implication of Jesus' actions is clear: for Jesus, the Temple group and the officials in charge of it were a temporary measure at best and a corruption of God's plan at worst. They would soon be done away with when the kingdom arrived.

This message did not escape the notice of those in charge of the Temple, the chief priests who also had jurisdiction over the local affairs of the people in Jerusalem. These priests, principally Sadducees, were the chief liaison with the Roman officials, in particular, the Roman prefect Pilate. For these reasons, the most plausible scenario for explaining Jesus' death is that Jesus' apocalyptic message, including its enactment in the Temple, angered some of the chief priests on the scene. These priests recognized how explosive the situation could become



**Figure 9.2** Jerusalem in the First Century C.E.



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.7 The Temple Incident as an Enacted Parable

Parables are simple stories that are invested with deeper spiritual meaning. An **enacted parable** is a simple action that carries a symbolic, spiritual significance. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets were sometimes told by God to perform a symbolic action to accompany their message. For some interesting examples, read Jer 13:1–14; 19:1–15; and 32:1–44; and Ezek 4:1–17. One of the most dramatic occurs in Isa 20:1–6 (one of the first recorded instances of streaking in human history).

Is it possible that Jesus' action in the Temple was an enacted parable meant to symbolize something far greater than itself? It is indeed possible that by overturning the tables and disrupting a small part of the Temple operation, Jesus was

making a symbolic gesture to indicate what was to happen in the coming destruction. Such an action would fit well with the predictions of the Temple's destruction by Jesus throughout the early (and late) traditions.

Jesus was by no means the first Jewish prophet to attack the Temple. Some 600 years earlier, the prophet Jeremiah pronounced a judgment that was quite similar (Jer 7:1–15; 26:1–15) and received a comparable response from the leaders in charge of the place (see Jer 26:8, 11). This may be one additional piece of evidence to suggest that Jesus saw himself principally as a prophetic spokesperson of God urging the people of Israel to repent in light of the coming judgment.

during the Passover feast, given the tendency of the celebration to become a silent protest that might erupt into something much worse. The Sadducean priests conferred with one another, had Jesus arrested, and questioned him for his words against the Temple. Knowing that they could not execute Jesus themselves, perhaps because the Romans did not allow the Jewish authorities to execute criminals (the matter is debated among historians), they delivered him over to Pilate, who had no qualms at all about disposing of yet one more troublemaker who might cause a major disturbance.

### Jesus' Associations

One other aspect of Jesus' public ministry can be spoken of with confidence by the historian, and here again an apocalyptic context provides some important insights. With whom did Jesus associate? There is little doubt that he had twelve followers whom he chose as his special disciples; the Gospels of Mark (3:16) and John (6:67) and the apostle Paul (1 Cor 15:5) all mention "the Twelve." Curiously, even though the Synoptics give different names for some of these followers (Mark 3:13–19; Matt 10:1–4; and Luke 6:12–16), all three Gospels know

that there were twelve of them. But why twelve? Why not eight? Or fourteen?

The number twelve makes sense from an apocalyptic perspective. The present age was coming to an end; God was bringing in his new kingdom for his people. Those who repented and did what God wanted them to do, as revealed in the teachings of Jesus, would enter into that kingdom. This new people of God would arise out of the old. Just as Israel had started out as twelve tribes headed by twelve patriarchs (according to the book of Genesis), so the new people of God would emerge from old Israel with twelve leaders at their head: "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28; from Q). Thus the disciples represented the new people of God, those who had repented in anticipation of the kingdom that would come soon, on the day of judgment. This appears to be why Jesus chose twelve of them.

We know that Jesus also associated with two other groups of people, whom early sources designate as "tax collectors" and "sinners." We can accept this tradition as authentic because references to



these groups are scattered throughout our sources (e.g., see Mark 2:15; Luke 7:34 [Q]; Luke 15:1 and 2 [L]); moreover, this is probably not the sort of tradition that a follower of Jesus would be inclined to make up. “Tax collectors” refers to local Jews employed by regional tax corporations to collect the revenues to be paid to Rome. These persons were unpopular in first-century Palestine because they supported Roman rule and sometimes grew rich through their association with the imperial government. For these reasons, tax collectors had a bad reputation among many of the Jewish subjects of Rome; they were not the sort of people that pious religious leaders were supposed to befriend. “Sinners” does not necessarily refer to prostitutes, as is sometimes thought, although certainly prostitutes and other habitually “sinful” people could be included in their ranks. It refers simply to those who were not scrupulous about observing the law of God. Jesus appears to have spent a good deal of his time with such folk.

From an apocalyptic perspective, these associations make sense. We have numerous teachings of Jesus in which he proclaims that the kingdom is coming not to those who are righteous but to those who are sinful. We have already seen that he does not associate in a friendly way with the religious leaders who scrupulously observe the regulations of the Torah, faithfully attend to the Temple group, or focus their attention on their own ritual purity. The kingdom that is coming is open to all who are willing to repent of their misdeeds, even the most lowly; they need only turn to God in love and receive his loving acceptance in return. Those who are willing to abandon everything to follow the teachings of Jesus, to turn from their evil ways and love God above all else and their neighbors as themselves—whether they are from the lower social classes, like the impoverished fishermen among the disciples; from the scandalous upper classes, like some of the wealthier tax collectors; or from the ranks of the religious outcasts, like the sinners—all such people will enter into the kingdom of God that is soon to arrive.

Finally, it is clear that Jesus was widely known to have associated with women and ministered to them in public, even though this would have been unusual for a first-century rabbi. Still, the importance of women for Jesus’ ministry is multiply attested in our earliest traditions. Mark, L (Luke’s

special source), and even Thomas, for example, indicate that Jesus was accompanied by women in his travels (Mark 15:40 and 41; Luke 8:1–3; *Gosp. Thom.* 114). Mark and L also indicate that women provided Jesus with financial support during his ministry, evidently serving as his patrons (Mark 15:40 and 41; Luke 8:1–3). In both Mark and John, Jesus is said to have engaged in public dialogue and debate with women who were not among his immediate followers (John 4:1–42; Mark 7:24–30). Both Gospels also record, independently of one another, the tradition that Jesus had physical contact with a woman who anointed him with oil in public (Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8). Moreover, in all four of the canonical Gospels, women are said to have accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem during the last week of his life, to have been present at his crucifixion, and to have been the first to believe that Jesus’ body was no longer in the tomb (Matt 27:55; 28:1–10; Mark 15:40 and 41; 16:1–8; Luke 23:49, 55; 24:10; John 19:25; 20:1 and 2; cf. *Gosp. Pet.* 50–57).

This widely attested tradition is contextually credible within an apocalyptic context. If, as we shall see, Jesus proclaimed that God was going to intervene in history to bring about a reversal of fortunes in which the last would be first and the first last, in which the humble would be exalted and the exalted humbled, then it would make sense that Jesus would have freely associated with women, who were generally looked down on as inferior by the men who made the rules and ran the society—and that they would have been particularly intrigued by his proclamation of the coming Kingdom.

### Jesus’ Reputation as an Exorcist and Healer

I have already stressed that it is impossible for the historian who sticks to the canons of historical inquiry to demonstrate that miracles have been performed in the past—whether by Jesus, Apollonius, Hanina ben Dosa, Muhammad, or anyone else (see box 9.8). To acknowledge that a miracle occurred requires belief in a supernatural realm to which the historian, as a historian, has no direct access (although a historian may feel that he or she has access to it as a believer). This does *not* mean, however, that the historian cannot talk about the *reports*



### BOX 9.8 Jesus the Miracle Worker

When considering Jesus' deeds, one is naturally struck by all the miracles he is said to have done in the Gospels. From start to end his life is miraculous, with miracles occurring on nearly every page of the Gospels—as Jesus heals the sick, stills the storm, multiplies the loaves, walks on water, casts out demons, and raises the dead. What is the historian, who wants to know what Jesus *really* did, to make of these reports?

Unfortunately, the historian is put into a bind by the stories of the miracles. The problem does not involve the philosophical issue of whether miracles can happen (some people say yes, some say no—but whatever they say, there is still a problem). Instead, the problem involves the nature of history and historical evidence. By their very nature, historians can only establish what *probably* happened in the past. We can never *prove* the past, we can only show what *probably* happened. But what are miracles?

of miracles that have been handed down from the past. These are a matter of public record, and when it comes to the historical Jesus, of course, there are numerous such reports. In particular, he is said to have performed exorcisms (i.e., cast out demons) and to have healed the sick.

To begin with the exorcisms, there can be little doubt that whether or not supernatural evil spirits invade human bodies to make them do vile and harmful things, Jesus was widely thought to be able to cast them out, restoring a person to health. His exorcisms are among the best-attested deeds of the Gospel traditions, with individual accounts scattered throughout the first part of Mark (e.g., 1:21–28; 5:1–20; 7:24–30), in M (e.g., Matt 9:32–34; this may be Q), and in L (e.g., Luke 13:10–14). Moreover, the theme that Jesus could and did cast out demons is documented in multiply attested forms throughout the sayings materials, for example, Mark, Q, and L (Mark 3:22; Matt 12:27 and 28; Luke 11:15, 19 and 20; 13:32). Such traditions cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity, of course, because Christians who thought that Jesus had overcome the powers of evil might well have wanted to tell

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

They are events that are so improbable that they defy the odds completely, contradicting all the known workings of nature to such an extent that . . . that we call them *miracles*!

And so the “historical” **problem of miracles**: since miracles are by definition the most improbable of occurrences, and since historians, by the very nature of their trade, can only establish what probably happened in the past, they can never say (by definition) that a miracle probably happened—whether it’s a miracle by Jesus, Apollonius of Tyana, Muhammad, or anyone else!

What historians *can* say, of course, is that certain people (like the three I just mentioned) were widely *thought* to have done miracles. When it comes to verifying the Gospel reports of the supernatural, that is about as far as the historian, whether a believer or not, can go. Jesus was widely believed to be someone who defied nature through his miraculous deeds.

stories to show that he did. But they are contextually credible, to the extent that we know of other persons, both pagan and Jewish, who were said to have had power over demons, including, for example, the great pagan holy man, Apollonius of Tyana, who lived a bit later in the first century (see also Mark 9:38).

It is interesting to observe that the controversy over Jesus was not about whether or not he had this ability but whether he had this power from God or the Devil. As reported in our earliest surviving Gospel:

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying that “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” (Mark 3:22)

Jesus’ response to the charge is telling, especially in the version preserved in the Q source:

If I cast demons out by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? . . . But if I cast demons out by the spirit of God, behold the Kingdom of God is come upon you. Or how is anyone able to enter into



the house of a strong man and steal his property, if he does not first bind the strong man? Only then he can plunder his house. (Matt 12:27–30; cf. Luke 11:19–23)

Note that everyone—Jesus and his opponents together—admits not only that Jesus can cast out demons, but that other Jewish exorcists can do so as well. Moreover, for Jesus, casting out demons signified the conquest over the forces of evil (the “strong man,” in this case, would represent the main power opposed to God, Satan). And most importantly, Jesus’ exorcisms are interpreted apocalyptically. They show that the Kingdom of God was at the doorstep. Strikingly, this apocalyptic view is the earliest understanding of the widespread tradition that Jesus could cast out demons.

Much the same can be said about Jesus’ reputation as a healer. On numerous layers of our traditions Jesus is said to have healed those with various ailments—fever, leprosy, paralysis, hemorrhaging, lameness, blindness, and so on—and even to have raised some who had already died (see Mark 5:35–43 and John 11:38–44). Whatever you think about the philosophical possibility of miracles of healing, it’s clear that Jesus was widely reputed to have done them. I might add that he was also known to have performed other miracles not associated with healing physical ailments, although dealing still with the “natural” world—for example, multiplying the loaves, walking on water, stilling the storm. Such miracles too are attested in multiple sources. Like the exorcisms, they cannot, of course, pass the criterion of dissimilarity.

They are contextually credible to the extent that there were other persons from the ancient world—lots of them, in fact—who were said to have done some fairly miraculous things, either through prayer (as in the case of Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the “circle-drawer”) or directly because of their own holiness (e.g., Apollonius of Tyana). It may be worth noting that many of the healing and nature miracles of Jesus in fact are closely related to miracles described in the Hebrew Bible of other Jewish prophets, and invariably, Jesus comes off looking even better than his prophetic predecessors. The prophet Elijah, for example, had to engage in some real personal theatrics to raise a child from the dead (1 Kings 17:17–24); Jesus could do it with just a word (Mark 5:35–43). Elijah’s

successor, Elisha, allegedly fed 100 people with just twenty barley loaves (2 Kings 4:42–44); Jesus fed over 5,000 (not counting the women and children!) with just five (Mark 6:30–44). Elisha was able to make an axhead float on the water (2 Kings 6:1–7); Jesus could *himself* walk on the water (Mark 6:45–52).

Interestingly enough, our earliest sources did not understand these activities to be signs that Jesus was himself God. They were the sorts of things that Jewish prophets did. Jesus simply did them better than anyone else. Moreover, the earliest traditions again assign an apocalyptic meaning to these acts. In the coming Kingdom of God there would be no more disease or death. Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. In a small way, then, the Kingdom was already becoming manifest. And there was not much time to wait before the end finally arrived. According to an account in Q, when John the Baptist wanted to know whether to expect another one to come or whether Jesus was himself the final prophet before the end, Jesus reportedly replied:

Tell John the things you have seen and heard: the blind are regaining their sight, the lame are starting to walk, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are starting to hear, the dead are being raised, and the poor are hearing the good news! (Luke 7:22; Matt 11:4 and 5)

The end has come, and the Son of Man is soon to appear in the climactic act of history, after which there will never again be any who are blind, lame, leprous, deaf, or poor. Jesus represented the final prophet before the end, who was already overcoming the forces of evil in the world.

### In Sum: The Deeds of Jesus

Although historians cannot demonstrate that Jesus performed miracles, they have been able to establish with some degree of certainty a few basic facts about Jesus’ life: he was baptized, he associated with tax collectors and sinners, he chose twelve disciples to be his closest companions, he caused a disturbance in the Temple near the end of his life, this disturbance eventuated in his crucifixion at the hands of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, and in the wake of his death, his followers established



vibrant Christian communities. What is striking is that all of these pieces of information add up to a consistent portrayal of Jesus. Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who anticipated the imminent end of the age, an end that would involve the destruction of Israel, including the Temple and its group, prior to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. As we turn now to consider more specifically some of the teachings of Jesus, we can fill out this basic apocalyptic message.

## THE APOCALYPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Scholars have been unable to establish a solid consensus on everything the historical Jesus said. Certainly, we cannot uncritically assume that he said many of the things recorded in such Gospels as *Thomas* or even *John*. As we have seen, a number of these teachings are not independently attested, and most of them appear to conform to the perspectives on Jesus that developed within the communities that preserved them. Thus, although Jesus makes many self-identifications in *John's Gospel*—“I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me,” “I and the Father are one”—none of these is independently attested in any other early source, and all of them coincide with the Christology that developed within the Johannine community. Indeed, one interesting piece of evidence that the author of the Fourth Gospel modified his traditions of Jesus’ sayings in conformity with his own views is that it is nearly impossible to know who is doing the talking in this narrative, unless we are explicitly told. Look for yourself: John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and the narrator of the story all speak in almost exactly the same way, suggesting that there is only one voice here, that of the Gospel writer.

Is it not possible, however, that the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus were also modified in accordance with the views of the early Christians, who, after all, were apocalypticists? This indeed is a possibility, and one that should be carefully considered, but remember that we have already established *on other grounds* that Jesus was an apocalypticist. It is very hard to explain the basic orientation of his ministry

otherwise, given the fact that it began with his decision to associate with the apocalypticist John the Baptist and was followed by the establishment of apocalyptic communities of his followers. Moreover, the deeds and experiences of Jesus that we can establish beyond reasonable doubt are consistent with his identity as an apocalypticist.

Given this orientation, it is not surprising that a large proportion of Jesus’ sayings in our earliest sources are teachings (see fig. 9.3) about the imminent arrival of the Son of Man, the appearance of the Kingdom of God, the coming day of judgment, and the need to repent and live in preparation for that day, the climax of history as we know it. Although we cannot assume that every saying in the Gospels that has any tint of apocalypticism in it is authentic, many of the apocalyptic sayings must have come from Jesus himself. Mark’s summary of Jesus’ teaching appears to be reasonably accurate (Mark 1:15): “The time has been fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in this good news!” For Jesus, the time of this age was all but complete; the bottom of the sand clock was nearly filled. This age was near its end and the new Kingdom was almost here. People needed to prepare by turning to God and accepting this good news.

Here we cannot consider all the sayings that can be established as authentically from Jesus, but we will explore several of the more characteristic ones. Jesus taught that God’s kingdom was soon to arrive on earth. Given Jesus’ social context and the apocalyptic character of his ministry, we can assume that he had in mind an actual kingdom—which people could “enter” and in which there would be human rulers and paradisial banqueting (see Matt 19:28; Luke 13: 23–29). This kingdom would replace the corrupt powers that were presently in control, a kingdom perhaps headed by God’s special anointed one, his messiah. This kingdom was going to come in a powerful way (Mark 9:1); people must watch for it and be prepared, for no one could know when exactly it would come and it would strike unexpectedly (Mark 13:32–35; Luke 21:34–36). But Jesus did know that it was to arrive soon—at least within the lifetime of some of his disciples (Mark 9:1; 13:30).

It appears that Jesus expected the kingdom to be brought by one whom he called the Son of Man. Scholars have engaged in long and acrimonious



**Figure 9.3** Ancient portrayal of Jesus teaching the apostles, from the catacomb of Domitilla in Rome.

debates about how to understand this designation. Is it a title for a figure that Jews would generally understand, for instance, a reference to the figure mentioned in Dan 7:13 and 14? Is it a general description of “a human-like being”? Is it a self-reference, a circumlocution for the pronoun “I”? Moreover, did Jesus actually use the term? Or did the Christians come up with it and attribute it to Jesus? If Jesus did use it, did he actually refer to himself as the Son of Man?

The details of this debate cannot concern us here, but I can indicate what seems to me to be the best way to resolve it. Some of Jesus’ sayings mention the Son of Man coming in judgment on the earth (e.g., Mark 8:38; 13:26 and 27; 14:62; Luke 12:8); these appear to presuppose a knowledge of the passage in Daniel where “one like a son of man” comes and is given the kingdoms of earth. We know of other Jewish apocalypticists who anticipated a cosmic judge of this type, sometimes called the “Son of Man” (see box 9.9). Jesus himself seems to have expected the imminent appearance of such a cosmic judge. In some sayings, such as the ones cited earlier (especially Mark 8:38 and 14:62), he does not identify himself as this figure but seems,

at least on the surface, to be speaking of somebody else. If Christians were to make up a saying of Jesus about the Son of Man, however, they would probably not leave it ambiguous as to whether he was referring to himself. As we have seen, therefore, on the grounds of dissimilarity (again, hotly debated) such sayings are probably authentic. Jesus anticipates the coming of a cosmic judge from heaven who will bring in God’s kingdom.

When he comes, there will be cosmic signs and a universal destruction. The messengers of God will gather together those who have been chosen for the kingdom (Mark 13:24–27). On the day of judgment, some people will be accepted into the kingdom, and others cast out. The judge will be like a fisherman who sorts through his fish, taking only the best and disposing of all the others (Matt 13:47–50; *Gosp. Thom.* 8).

This judgment will bring about a total reversal of the social order. Those in positions of power and prestige will be removed, and the oppressed and afflicted will be exalted. It is the forces of evil who are currently in charge of this planet, and those who side with them are the ones in power. Those who side with God, however, are the persecuted and



## ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

### BOX 9.9 Another Apocalyptic Jesus

As we have seen, Jesus of Nazareth was not the only apocalyptic prophet who proclaimed the imminent judgment of God, which would befall not just the Jewish enemies (the Romans), but some of the Jews themselves. In addition to the “Egyptian,” and the prophet named “Theudas,” Josephus tells us of yet another apocalyptic figure from the first century, who lived about thirty years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Oddly enough, this other prophet was also named Jesus (not an unusual name at the time).

According to Josephus (*Jewish Wars*, Book 6), **Jesus, the son of Ananias**, appeared in Jerusalem during an annual feast and began to cry aloud, “A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house [i.e., the Temple] . . . a voice against the whole people.” The local authorities

found this purveyor of doom a nuisance and had him beaten, but that did not stop him. He continued to proclaim loudly, in public, “Woe, woe to Jerusalem.” The Roman procurator then had him arrested and flogged within an inch of his life. But deciding that he was literally crazy, the procurator had him released.

For another seven years this Jesus continued to proclaim that the destruction of Jerusalem was coming, until the city was laid siege in the late 60s C.E. and he himself was killed by a stone catapulted over the walls by the Romans.

In any event, Jesus of Nazareth was not the only Jewish prophet to proclaim the coming destruction of the city, nor the only one to be opposed by the local Jewish leadership, nor the only one to be arrested and punished by the Roman governor. He was not even the only one like this to be named Jesus!

downtrodden, who are dominated by the cosmic powers opposed to God. Thus, when God reasserts his control over this planet, all of this will be reversed: “The first shall be last and the last first” (Mark 10:30), and “all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11; 18:14[Q]). This was not simply a hopeful pipe dream; Jesus expected it actually to happen.

The coming of the Son of Man is not good news for those in power. They would be better served to relinquish their power—to become like children (Mark 10:13–15), to give away their wealth and become poor (Mark 10:23–30), to yield their positions of prestige and become slaves (Mark 10:42–44). Not even the official leaders of the Jewish people would escape, for everyone who lords it over another would be liable. Indeed, the very locus of power for the influential Sadducees, the Temple of God itself, would be destroyed on judgment day: “There will be not one stone left upon another that will not be destroyed” (Mark 13:2).

On the other hand, those who currently suffer, the oppressed and downtrodden, would be rewarded.

This promise is expressed in Jesus’ Beatitudes, found in Q: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of Heaven [meaning that they will be made rich when it arrives]; Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied [when the Kingdom comes]; Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall rejoice; Blessed are you who are hated by others, and reviled . . . for your reward will be great” (Luke 6:20–23; see *Gosp. Thom.* 54, 68 and 69).

Because there is to be such a dramatic reversal when the Son of Man brings the kingdom, a person should be willing to sacrifice everything to enter into it. A person’s passion to obtain the kingdom should be like that of a merchant in search of pearls; when he finds one that is perfect, he sells everything that he has to buy it (Matt 13:45 and 46; *Gosp. Thom.* 76). People should not, for this reason, be tied to this world or the alluring treasures that it has to offer; instead, they should focus on the kingdom that is coming (Matt 6:19, 33; *Gosp. Thom.* 63).

At the same time, we should not think that Jesus was maintaining that everyone who happened to be poor or hungry or mistreated would



## ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

### BOX 9.10 Judas and the Roasting Chicken

When trying to determine which stories in the Gospels are historically accurate, we need to look not only at the Gospels of the New Testament, but at all the surviving ancient narratives that discuss Jesus' life. In many instances, however, the accounts are quite obviously legendary, written for the entertainment, edification, or even instruction of their readers. One example occurs in a fourth- or fifth-century document known as the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (also called the *Acts of Pilate*). In one of the most interesting manuscripts of this Gospel, we find a tale about what happened to **Judas Iscariot** after he betrayed Jesus. Filled with remorse for what he has done, Judas returns home to find some rope

with which to hang himself. When he comes into the kitchen, he finds his wife roasting a chicken on a spit over a charcoal fire. To her horror, he announces his plan to commit suicide. She asks why he would want to do such a thing, and he indicates that it is because he has betrayed the Lord to his death and that Jesus will surely rise from the dead and then he, Judas, will be in *real* trouble. His wife assures him: Jesus cannot rise from the dead any more than this chicken on the spit can come back to life.

But as soon as she utters these words, the dead chicken rises up, spreads its wings, and crows three times. A terrified Judas runs out to grab some rope and end his life.

enter into God's kingdom. He expected that people first had to repent and adhere to his teachings (see Mark 1:15; 2:17; Luke 15:7). This is what his own disciples had done; they left everything to follow him. As a result, they were promised special places of prominence in the coming kingdom. Similarly, Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners should not be taken to mean that he approved of any kind of lifestyle. To be sure, he did not insist that his followers keep the detailed traditions of the Pharisees: he appears to have believed that what mattered was at the heart of the Torah, the command for people to love God with their entire being and to love their neighbors as themselves (Mark 12:28–31, where he quotes Deut 6:4 and Lev 19:18; see *Gosp. Thom.* 25). Occasionally, in his view, the overly scrupulous attention to the details of the Torah could, perhaps ironically, lead to a violation of these basic principles (Mark 7:1–13). The Sabbath, for example, was created for the sake of humans, not humans for the Sabbath. Human need, therefore, had priority over the punctilious observation of rules for keeping the Sabbath (Mark 2:27 and 28). For Jesus, then, keeping the Torah was indeed important; this happened, however, not when Jews followed the carefully formulated rulings of the Pharisees but

when they repented of their bad behavior and turned to God with their entire being and manifested their love for him in their just and loving treatment of their neighbors.

These examples make it clear that the guidelines for living that Jesus gave, that is, his ethics, were grounded in his apocalyptic worldview. They are probably misunderstood, therefore, when they are taken as principles for a healthy society. Jesus did teach that people should love one another, but not because he wanted to help them lead happy and productive lives or because he knew that if love were not at the root of their dealings with one another society might fall apart. He was not a teacher of ethics concerned with how people should get along in the future. For Jesus, the end was coming soon, within his own generation. The motivation for ethical behavior, then, sprang from the imminent arrival of the kingdom, to be brought by the Son of Man in judgment.

Those who began to implement the ideals of the kingdom, where there would be no sin, hatred, or evil, had in a sense begun to experience the rule of God here and now. This rule of God would find its climax in the powerful appearance of the Son of Man. The followers of Jesus who had begun to live the life of the kingdom by loving God and their



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### BOX 9.11 Jesus and “Family Values”

One of the hardest things for modern people who are interested in Jesus to realize is that he lived in a completely different culture from ours, with a foreign set of cultural values and norms—so much so that people commonly claim that he did not mean (or rather could not have meant) what he said. Nowhere is this more clear than in the area known today as “family values.”

Because the modern sense of family values seems to be so good and wholesome, it is only natural for people to assume that Jesus too must have taught them. But did he? It is striking that in our earliest traditions, Jesus does *not* seem to place a high priority on the family. Consider the words preserved in Q: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life, he is not able to be my disciple” (Luke 14:26; Matt 10:37). A person must *hate* his or her family? The same word is used, strikingly, in the saying independently preserved in the *Gospel of Thomas*: “The one who does not hate his father and mother will not be worthy to be my disciple” (*Gosp. Thom.* 55). If we understand “hate” here to mean something like “despise in comparison to” or “have nothing to do with,” then the saying makes sense. Parents, siblings, spouses, and even one’s own children were to be of no importance in comparison with the coming kingdom.

This may help explain Jesus’ reaction to his own family. For there are clear signs not only that Jesus’ family rejected his message during his public ministry, but that he in turn spurned them publicly (independently attested in Mark 3:31–34 and *Gosp. Thom.* 99).

And Jesus clearly saw the familial rifts that would be created when someone became committed to his message of the coming Kingdom of God:

You think that I have come to bring peace on earth; not peace, I tell you, but division. For from now on there will be five people in one house, divided among themselves: three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother; a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51–53; Matt 10:34–46; independently attested in *Gosp. Thom.* 16)

And family tensions would be heightened immediately before the end of the age, when “a brother will betray his brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise up against their parents and kill them” (Mark 13:12).

These “antifamily” traditions are too widely attested in our sources to be ignored (they are found in Mark, Q, and *Thomas*, for example) and suggest that Jesus did not support what we today might think of as family values. But why not? Could it be that Jesus was not ultimately interested in establishing a good society and doing what was necessary to maintain it? Remember that for him the end was coming soon, and the present social order was being called radically into question. What mattered were not strong family ties and the social institutions of this world. What mattered was the new thing that was coming, the future kingdom. And it was impossible to promote this teaching while trying to retain the present social structure. That would be like trying to put new wine into old wineskins or trying to sew a new piece of cloth to an old garment. As any winemaster or seamstress could tell you, it just won’t work. The wineskins would burst and the garment would tear. New wine and new cloth require new wineskins and new garments. The old is passing away and the new is almost here (Mark 2:18–22; *Gosp. Thom.* 47).

neighbors as themselves were merely a small prelude; they were like a tiny mustard seed in comparison with the great mustard bush that represented the coming kingdom (Mark 4:30 and 31; *Gosp. Thom.* 20). Indeed, they were not many in number because the words of Jesus for the most part fell on deaf ears. But when these words came to those who

were chosen for the kingdom, they were like vibrant seed falling on rich soil; they bore fruit of far greater worth and magnitude than one could imagine (Mark 4:1–9; *Gosp. Thom.* 9). For this reason, those who heard the good news of the kingdom were not only to prepare themselves but also to proclaim the message of Jesus to others. As the



Gospels express it, no one puts a lamp under a bushel but on a light stand, so that all might see the light and recognize the truth that has now been made clear, the truth of God's coming kingdom (Mark 4:21 and 22; *Gosp. Thom.* 33).

It is difficult to know what Jesus thought about his own role in this imminent Kingdom of God. On occasion he speaks as if he expected to enter into the kingdom himself, and he seems to have anticipated that this was to be soon (e.g., Mark 14:25). As we have seen, the disciples were to be leaders in this new kingdom, but who would lead them? Would it still be Jesus? Would he be the ultimate leader of this new Kingdom of God on earth, the one whom God appoints as king? If this is what Jesus thought—and, of course, it is impossible to know what anyone thinks, especially someone who lived 2,000 years ago, whom we know only through such fragmentary sources—then he may have considered himself to be the future messiah, but only in this apocalyptic sense.



## THE APOCALYPTIC DEATH OF JESUS

As we have seen, several aspects of the Gospel Passion narratives appear to be historically accurate. Jesus offended members of the Sadducees by his apocalyptic actions in the Temple just prior to the Passover feast. They decided to have him taken out of the way. Perhaps they were afraid that his followers would swell as the feast progressed and that the gathering might lead to a riot, or perhaps they simply found his views offensive and considered his attack on the Temple of God blasphemous. In either case, they appear to have arranged with one of his own disciples to betray him. Jesus was arrested and questioned by a Jewish Sanhedrin called for the occasion, possibly headed up by the high priest Caiaphas. He was then delivered over to the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, who condemned him to be crucified. The time between his arrest and his crucifixion may have been no more than twelve hours; he was sent off to his execution before anyone knew what was happening.

What else can we know about Jesus' last days? Here we will look at some of the more intriguing questions that have occurred to scholars over the years. One of these is, why was Jesus in Jerusalem in

the first place? The theologian might say that Jesus went to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world; this view, however, is based on Gospel sayings of Jesus that cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity (e.g., his three Passion predictions in Mark). In making judgments about why this itinerant teacher from Galilee went to Jerusalem, we should stick to our historical criteria whatever we may think theologically.

It is possible that Jesus simply wanted to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, as did so many thousands of other Jews every year. But Jesus' actions there appear to have been well thought out. When he arrived, he entered the Temple and caused a disturbance. Afterward he evidently spent several days in and out of the Temple, teaching his message of the coming kingdom. Given Jesus' understanding that this kingdom was imminent and the urgency with which he taught others that they needed to repent in preparation for it, we should perhaps conclude that he had come to Jerusalem to bring his message to the center of Israel itself, to the Temple in the holy city, where faithful Jews from around the world would be gathered to worship the God who saved them from their oppressors in the past and who was expected to do so once more (see fig. 9.4). Jesus came to the Temple to tell his people how this salvation would occur and to urge them to prepare for it by repenting of their sins and accepting his teachings. He proclaimed that judgment was coming and that it would involve a massive destruction, including the destruction of the Temple.

Did Jesus realize that he was about to be arrested and executed? Again, there is simply no way to know for certain what Jesus thought. It is not hard to imagine, however, that anyone with any knowledge at all of how prophets of doom were generally received, both in ancient times and more recently, might anticipate receiving similar treatment. Moreover, Jesus would probably have known that the leaders in Jerusalem did not take kindly to his message, and he certainly would have known about their civil power. According to the traditions, of course, Jesus knew that his time had come on the night of his arrest. There are a number of difficulties with accepting the accounts of the Last Supper as historically accurate, especially when Jesus indicates that his death will be for the forgiveness of sins, a clearly Christian notion that cannot



**Figure 9.4** A portrayal of Jesus' triumphal entry, found on the famous sarcophagus of a Christian named Junius Bassus.

pass the criterion of dissimilarity. Still, we have two independent accounts of the event (Mark 14:22–26 and 1 Cor 11:23–26), the earliest of which was written in the mid-50s C.E. by Paul, who claims to have received the tradition from others. Did he learn it from someone who was present at the event or from a Christian who knew someone who was there? In any case, the basic notion that at his last meal Jesus explained that he would not last long in the face of his powerful opposition is not at all implausible.

Why did Judas betray Jesus, and what did he betray? These again are extraordinarily difficult questions to answer. That Judas did betray Jesus is almost certain; it is multiply attested and is not a tradition that a Christian would have likely invented. Did Jesus have no more authority over his disciples than *that*? Why he did so, however, will always remain a mystery. Some of our accounts intimate that he did it simply for the money (Matt 26:14 and 15; cf. John 12:4–6). This is possibly the case, but the “thirty pieces of silver” is a reference to a fulfillment of a prophecy in the Hebrew Bible (Zech 11:12) and may not be historically accurate.

What appears certain is that Jesus was eventually handed over to the Roman authorities, who tried him on the charge that he called himself king of the Jews. That this was the legal case against him is multiply attested by independent sources. Moreover, as has often been noted, in the early Gospels, the designation of Jesus as king of the Jews is found only in the crowd’s acclamation (not the disciples’) at his entry into Jerusalem and in the accounts of his trial (Mark 15, Matthew 27, Luke 23, John 18 and 19); nowhere do his disciples actually call him this. Because the early Christians did not generally favor, or even use, the designation “king of the Jews” for Jesus, they probably would not have made it up as the official charge against him. This must, therefore, be a historically accurate tradition.

Claiming to be king of the Jews was a political charge that amounted to insurrection or treason against the state. That is why Jesus was executed by the Romans under Pontius Pilate, not by the Jewish authorities, who may not have been granted the power of capital punishment in any case. That the Romans actually did the deed is attested by a wide range of sources, including even Josephus and Tacitus.

But why did the Roman authorities execute Jesus if it was the Jewish authorities who had him arrested in the first place? We know that Jesus must have offended powerful members of the Sadducees by his action in the Temple. Through the high priest **Caiaphas**, the chief authority over local affairs, these leaders arranged to have Jesus arrested. Once he was taken, he was brought in for questioning. We cannot know for certain how the interrogation proceeded; none of Jesus’ disciples was present, and our earliest account, Mark’s, is historically problematic (see box 5.4). Perhaps we can best regard it as a fact-finding interrogation. The Sanhedrin evidently decided to have Jesus taken out of the way. Using the information (given by Judas?) that he had been called the messiah, they sent Jesus before the prefect Pilate. We do not know exactly what happened at this trial. Possibly Pilate was as eager to be rid of a potential troublemaker during these turbulent times as the chief priests were.

When Pilate chose to have someone executed, he could do so on the spur of the moment. There was no imperial legal code that had to be followed,

no requirements for a trial by jury, no need to call witnesses or to establish guilt beyond reasonable doubt, no need for anything that we ourselves might consider due process. Roman governors were given virtually free rein to do whatever was required to keep the peace and collect the tribute. Pilate is known to history as a ruthless administrator, insensitive to the needs and concerns of the people he governed, willing to exercise brutal force whenever it served Rome's best interests. So, perhaps on the basis of a brief hearing in which he asked a question or two, Pilate decided to have Jesus executed. It was probably one of several items on a crowded morning agenda; it may have taken only a couple of minutes. Two other persons were charged with sedition the same morning. All three were taken outside the city gates to be crucified.

According to the Gospel traditions, Jesus was first flogged. It is hard to say whether this is a Christian addition to show how much Jesus suffered or a historical account. In any event, he and the others would have been taken by soldiers outside the city gates and forced to carry their crossbeams to the

upright stakes kept at the site of execution. The uprights were reused, possibly every day. There the condemned would have been nailed to the crossbeams, or possibly to the uprights themselves, through the wrists and possibly the ankles. There may have been a small ledge attached to the upright on which they could sit to rest.

The death itself would have been slow and painful. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst offenders of the lowest classes: slaves, common thieves, and insurrectionists. It was a death by suffocation. As the body hung on the cross, the lung cavity would distend beyond the point at which one could breathe. To relieve the pain on the chest, one had to raise the body up, either by pulling on the stakes through the wrists or by pushing on those through the feet, or both. Death came only when the victim lacked the strength to continue. Sometimes it took days.

In Jesus' case, death came within several hours, in the late afternoon, on a Friday during Passover week. He was taken from his cross and given a quick burial sometime before sunset on the day before Sabbath (see box 9.12).

## AT A GLANCE

### BOX 9.12 Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet

1. The earliest surviving traditions about Jesus portray him as an apocalypticist. Many of these traditions pass our historical criteria.
2. That Jesus was an apocalypticist also makes sense of the facts that
  - a. He began his ministry by being baptized by John the Baptist (an apocalyptic prophet).
  - b. The early Christian church (which was also apocalyptic) appeared in his aftermath.
3. The historically reliable traditions of Jesus' deeds make sense in an apocalyptic context: his crucifixion, cleansing of the Temple, choice of twelve disciples, association with outcasts, and reputation as miracle worker.
4. The teachings of Jesus that pass our criteria are apocalyptic as well:
  - a. The Son of Man was to appear from heaven, coming in judgment on the earth.
  - b. Those who sided with Jesus and accepted his teachings, reforming their lives as he proclaimed, would be saved in this judgment.
  - c. Those who did not would be destroyed.
  - d. This judgment of God was imminent, to happen within his disciples' lifetimes.
5. We know more about the last days and death of Jesus than about any other period of his life. He was betrayed by one of his own followers to the Sadduceic leaders in Jerusalem, handed over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (in town to keep the peace during Passover), condemned after a brief trial, and crucified outside the city walls on a Friday morning during the festival.